

Remarks on Departure for Monmouth Junction, New Jersey, and an Exchange With Reporters

August 23, 2000

California Electricity Shortage

The President. Before I leave for New Jersey today, I want to make a brief announcement about some action we're taking to help consumers in southern California who have been hit very hard by skyrocketing electric bills. I want to thank Governor Davis, Senator Feinstein, Senator Boxer, and Congressman Filner for their leadership on this issue and their work with me.

The wholesale price of electricity has risen sharply in California this summer as a result of tight supplies and growing demand. This is having a particularly heavy impact where the price hikes are being passed on to consumers, as they are in the San Diego region. Many families and small businesses in San Diego have seen their electric bills more than double. I've heard reports of senior citizens on fixed incomes being forced to choose between medicine and air-conditioning.

Today we're taking three new steps to help ease the burden. First, Secretary Richardson has asked the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to expedite its investigation of the wholesale power markets, so we can better understand what is happening in California and provide policymakers with the information they need to protect consumers in a timely fashion.

Second, I'm directing the Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Shalala to release \$2.6 million in Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program funds for the families of southern California. This doubles the amount of LIHEAP assistance in the San Diego region and will help to ensure that low income families and senior citizens have the emergency help they need to pay their bills and stay cool.

Third, I'm directing the Small Business Administration to step up their efforts to inform small businesses about SBA loans to help cope with unusually high electric bills.

All of these are short-term steps to help families in southern California during the current power crunch. I also renew my call to Congress to work with us to build a better

energy future over the long run, to take up my energy budget initiatives and the tax incentives to promote energy efficiency and conservation. I hope they will also pass a national comprehensive bill to foster a new era of the right kind of competition in the electric industry to establish a more competitive, efficient, and reliable electric power system for our Nation and to beef up efforts to prevent utilities from abusing their market power to raise rates above competitive levels. This legislation would save our consumers about \$20 billion a year in power costs. We ought to do it, and we ought to do it this year.

Let me say once again to the people of southern California, we'll continue to keep a close eye on the situation. We'll do what we can to help you get through this summer.

Thank you very much.

Q. Mr. President, do you think—[*inaudible*].

The President. Excuse me, sir?

Q. Mr. President, do you think the power companies are profiteering in California?

The President. Well, that's what FERC's going to investigate. Secretary Richardson and I talked about it. We want the FERC to look into it and see what the facts are. There is an unusual impact there, different from virtually any other place in America, and it needs to be examined, and I hope it will be. I hope the assistance we're giving in the meanwhile will help.

And again I will say, I believe that we could do an enormous amount if the Congress would pass the energy budget initiatives, the tax incentives to buy energy-efficient homes, vehicles, to retrofit businesses, and would pass the electric utility deregulation.

Let me remind you—some of you may remember this—I went out to the Inland Empire, east of L.A., I believe it was in San Bernardino, to dedicate a housing project that was part of an effort with the National Home Builders and the Energy Department, for working people on modest incomes. And the homes that they built there lowered average electric rates by over 40 percent.

So we need to take some structural action here to empower the American people to solve this problem themselves, too. If we

have deregulation and we give better incentives to people to build or retrofit their homes, their offices, and to buy other energy-efficient appliances, we could make a big difference here in almost no time. So I hope that will happen.

Go ahead, Mark [Mark Knoller, CBS Radio].

1996 Campaign Fundraising

Q. Sir, what do you think of Janet Reno's decision not to name a special counsel to investigate Al Gore's fundraising? Do you think it may look to some people like a whitewash?

The President. I don't know any more about that than you do. I learned about it when I picked up the paper this morning. Go ahead.

Meeting With President-Elect Vicente Fox of Mexico

Q. Well, what are you hoping for from your meeting tomorrow with President-elect Fox of Mexico in terms of U.S. business potential and potential for the U.S. economy?

The President. Well, first of all, I want to get to know him, and I want to reaffirm the support of the United States, which I think is bipartisan, for good strong relationships with Mexico, the need for us to work together to deal with the drug challenge, our common environmental challenges along the border, and to make our trade relationship work for both sides. And so, obviously, I hope that there will be long-term economic benefits.

I think he's quite serious about modernizing the Mexican economy and moving forward with our relationship. And I've been impressed with what I've seen and heard about him so far, and I'm anxious to meet him and do what I can to get our relationship off to a good start.

2000 Election

Q. Mr. President, a lot of State Democratic chairs would like you to come out and do some targeted campaigning to help get out the base in November. Do you think that's a good idea? Is that something you intend to do?

The President. Well, first of all, I think the most important thing is for me to do as

much as I can for the American people in the job I have between now and January the 20th, and that's my main priority. The second most important thing is for Al Gore and Joe Lieberman to go out and spread the message, engage in the debate, and make sure the American people know what the choices are before them. And I think they're doing quite a good job of that.

Now, if I can help, of course, within those parameters, I will do that. I went to Michigan yesterday. I'm going to New Jersey today. I will do some work within the limits of my ability to do it. But the main thing is that the candidates carry the message, and I think they're doing a fine job.

Colombia

Q. Mr. President, on Colombia, you signed a waiver yesterday so that the aid could start flowing. There are still some problems of human rights violations, and Congress has a lot of doubt. You're going to be there next Wednesday.

The President. I did sign the waiver, but the Congress also passed the aid package, and they expect it to go forward. I did it because I believe President Pastrana is committed to dealing with the human rights issues about which we're still very concerned. He has submitted legislation to the Colombian Parliament, for example, for civil trials, for allegations of military abuses of human rights. And we also have a system in place for specific case-by-case investigation of serious allegations.

So I think that we've protected our fundamental interest in human rights and enabled the Plan Colombia to have a chance to succeed, which I think is very, very important for the long-term stability of democracy and human rights in Colombia and for protecting the American people and the Colombian people from the drug traffic.

Q. Are you—[inaudible]—human rights in favor of the money?

The President. No. No. First of all, the money is designed to help combat the drug-trafficking and to help alleviate a lot of the social problems, to help to develop alternative economic development, and also to build the civil institutions in Colombia which will help to protect human rights.

So what I did was to permit Plan Colombia to go forward and be implemented because I'm convinced that the President is committed to the proper course in human rights—he submitted legislation which is evidence of that—and because we haven't given up our ability to look into case-by-case allegations of human rights violations dealing with specific military units who can be kept from getting any of this assistance if they have, in fact, committed human rights violations.

Human Embryo Research

Q. Mr. President, can you talk about your administration's decision to support federally-funded stem cell research, and are you worried about the controversy involved in that?

The President. Well, I believe if people will actually—Secretary Shalala and I had a long talk about this before we came out this morning—I think that if the public will look at, first of all, the potentially staggering benefits of this research, everything from birth defects to Parkinson's to Alzheimer's to diabetes—profoundly important there—to certain kinds of cancers, spinal cord injuries, burns, anything kind of regeneration of cells that's required, the potential to change the future, the health future for Americans and for people around the world is breathtaking.

Secondly, these guidelines were not put out without a rigorous scientific review. And human embryo research deals only with those embryos that were, in effect, collected for in vitro fertilization that never will be used for that. So I think that the protections are there; the most rigorous scientific standards have been met. But if you just—just in the last couple of weeks we've had story after story after story of the potential stem cell research to deal with these health challenges. And I think we cannot walk away from the potential to save lives and improve lives, to help people literally to get up and walk, to do all kinds of things we could never have imagined, as long as we meet rigorous ethical standards. And I'm convinced, and Secretary Shalala is convinced, that that has been done.

Meeting With President-Elect Fox of Mexico

Q. Mr. President, President-elect Fox has talked about open borders between the United States and Mexico. Generally speaking, sir, do you support that concept even over the long term, and do you expect it to be a dominant part of your meeting tomorrow?

The President. Well, I want to hear what he has to say about it, and how we would go about dealing with the problems that we have with the trade arrangement we have now, whether they would be amplified. In general, I think there will be increasing interdependence of the world's economies over the next decade, increasing interdependence in our region.

I think—I believe we should have done more with South America. We've got the Caribbean Basin trade initiative, which I think is good. We've got the relationship with Mexico, which I think has been a net plus for the United States, both economically and politically. We didn't extend our trade agreements to the rest of South America, and I think that the Europeans have benefited at our expense. So I think there will be more interdependence, and the United States has to be a part of that.

But like everything else, the devil is always in the details here, so I want to talk to him about it and see what he has in mind. I would imagine most of this work would have to be done by the next administration.

Yes.

Oil Production

Q. [Inaudible]—U.S. doing to convince OPEC nations to increase output, and will you be discussing this issue with Nigeria when you go?

The President. OPEC nations? I'm sorry. Well, as you know, we have done what we could—I was actually—I was reviewing the situation last night, and yes, I will discuss it with Nigeria. But we have to look at where there is excess capacity.

Part of this is a question of whether the OPEC nations can increase their production. Part of the problem is coming because

there's now renewed economic growth elsewhere in the world. And it seems to me, just looking at all the numbers over the long run, we're going—we'll get some benefit out of that. That is, I expect you'll see a significant increase in American exports over the next 6 months to 2 years because of the increasing growth in other parts of the world, but as a result of that, it's putting more pressure on the oil supplies that are available.

So I'm going to do what I can to keep these prices moderated and to continue to argue to all the OPEC nations that, if the price gets too high, they will cause recession in other countries, and then the purchases will drop dramatically and for a longer period of time. They're much better off with a price that's below where it is now but one that can be sustained. They don't want to go down to \$13 to \$15 a barrel again, but we don't need it—it needs to be, I think, in the low twenties somewhere. I think that's—low to mid twenties is a more sustainable rate. And so I will clearly discuss it with President Obasanjo and with others in the weeks ahead.

Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, how—look for your legal defense fund?

Q. Are you back in the spotlight? [*Laughter*]

The President. I'm going to New Jersey.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:53 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Grey Davis of California; Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Senator Joseph I. Lieberman; President Andres Pastrana of Colombia; and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria.

Remarks at Crossroads Middle School in Monmouth Junction, New Jersey

August 23, 2000

Thank you. Please be seated, everybody. We all appreciated the standing ovation, but you're about to get tired. [*Laughter*] I am so glad to be here. Let me say, first of all, I thought Malaika Carpenter gave a terrific talk, didn't you? [*Applause*] I understand her parents, Nancy and Lenny, and her brother

Jerren are here. Where are they? Stand up there. You did well.

I'd like to thank Dr. Stewart for welcoming us here, and Dr. Warfel, the principal here. I'd also like to say a special word of appreciation for this terrific band. Weren't they great, this jazz band? [*Applause*] I mean, they played "Hail To The Chief," and "On Broadway," and "Caravan," and lots of other things, and they did it very, very well. There aren't many middle school bands in America that are that good, I can tell you. And you should be very proud of them. They're really good.

And I'd like to thank the other students that met with me just a few moments ago. And I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to your Representative in Congress, Rush Holt, who is here with me. Since I'm at a school, I can say this. Rush was a university professor for about a decade, an educator, a trained physicist. When he got elected, we all used to kid him that he knew entirely too much to be a politician. We thought it would be a terrible burden. But I can tell you, from my point of view as someone who has worked for 8 years to improve the quality and the availability of opportunity in education, it has been a real joy to have someone like him with the depth of commitment to education that he has demonstrated these last 2 years. It's been wonderful.

Well, we're about to go back to school. And I've always thought of back to school time as sort of a new beginning. It certainly is for the students and the teachers: new students, new books, new school supplies, new faces in the classroom, a time when a lot of parents stop and think again about the role of education in their own children's lives and what they hope will be their children's future. I think it's a good time for our country to do the same. So today I'd like to talk a little bit about what we can do to prepare our schools and our children not just for the new school year but for the new economy of the 21st century.

We are very fortunate in America today to be living in the longest economic expansion in our history, to have 22 million new jobs and the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years and the highest homeownership ever, a 25-year low in the crime rate, a 35-year low in the welfare rolls, with incomes